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Reconstructing Woman: From Fiction to Reality in the Nineteenth-Century French Novel (Book Review)

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Kelly, Dorothy. *Reconstructing Woman: From Fiction to Reality in the Nineteenth-Century French Novel*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. Pp 178. ISBN 978-0-271-03266-5

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Why dream of creating an artificial woman? Beyond the common mythic image of Pygmalion or of the literary trope that equates writing with giving birth, what underpins this popular fantasy? By exploring a creation scenario common to the works of four major French novelists of the nineteenth century—Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, and Villiers—Dorothy Kelly addresses these provocative questions in this ambitious, well researched, and insightful book.

In the texts of each author, a “new Pygmalion” (as Balzac calls one of his characters) replaces a real woman he has loved or desired in favor of his artificial re-creation of her. All four authors also portray the possibility that this simulacrum, which replaces the woman, could somehow become real. The four central chapters, each dedicated to a different author, thus examine this plot and its meanings in various texts by each (with the exception of the chapter on Villiers, in which only *L’Eve future* is treated).

Kelly’s premise is that this shared representation stems largely from the discovery in the nineteenth century that bodies and persons are things that can be made, constructed, and transformed. Since one of the major factors contributing to this discovery is the science of the time, she looks at selected (and sometimes wonderfully odd) scientific trends that attracted one or more of the authors: mesmerism, hypnosis, dissection, transformism and evolution, new understandings of human reproduction, spontaneous generation, *puériculture*, graphic physiology, and the experimental method. In so doing, she examines the ideas of a wide variety of scientists and inventors, ranging from the relatively well known Bernard, Lamarck, Charcot, and Haeckel to the more obscure Marey, Pouchet, Virchow, and Vacher de la Pougé. Their ideas and practices are seen as providing the novelists with a scientific context in which controlling, changing, and creating human bodies became imaginable. Science, together with their own literary art, thus provided the authors with a means of confronting what Kelly calls the “crisis of distinction”—that is, an intellectual and cultural malaise of the time in which the boundaries between the real and the artificial, between man and animal, and between man and machine, were seen as unclear.

Hence, Kelly shows how these authors explore the ways in which not only bodies but identity too can be made and constructed. In close readings, she demonstrates how these narratives reveal that linguistic and coded social structures shape human identity. In addition she examines how, through the representation of the power of language to do that shaping, the authors envision that their own texts would perform that function. The narrative enactment of the reconstruction of woman thus embodies the fantasy and desire that their novels could create or transform both reality and their readers in quite literal ways.

Through her perceptive readings and her acute understanding of science, feminism, and theories of identity, Kelly offers fresh insights into the old notion of artistic creation as male birth. In so doing, moreover, she shows how these nineteenth-century authors anticipated in interesting and diverse ways the postmodern world of plastic surgery, artificial intelligence, eugenics, cloning, robots, and cyborgs. Her sophisticated and important book has great potential to open up new avenues of research.